

Life. Inspired

Arbiters of style and refined living

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ESCAPE TO WILD SAMBURU

Get up close to wondrous wildlife across the remote northern frontiers of Kenya without sacrificing creature comforts like tented suites and private plunge pools.



CALL OF THE WILD

A stunning luxury lodge in Kenya's remote northern frontiers is synonymous with safaris and sustainability.

BY CHIN MUI YOON Photography by ART CHEN

Our safari starts from the 'airport' itself—a strip of clearing across the harsh red earth at the Buffalo Springs Game Reserve that is rich with wildlife. It will be hard to match a typical welcome at Sasaab, a stylish resort in Kenya's arid, semi-desert northern region of Samburu stretching across some 8,000sq miles.

Our guide Gabriel and wildlife tracker Onesmas Lesiata are waiting by a Land Cruiser.

"Jambo!" they call out with grins and hearty handshakes, atypical of a Kenyan's warm greeting.

Lesiata is a handsome young Samburu warrior in his early 20s adorned with intricate beadwork and wooden earplugs in his pierced earlobes with a knife hanging by his waist.

The Samburu are a proud warrior race of cattle owning pastoralists dwelling in the rugged highlands of northern Kenya whose lands were never inhabited by European settlers. Unlike the Maasai and Kikuyu, the Samburu are little known. They continue practising their customs and ceremonies as their forefathers have and live in a polygamous society overseen by elders who rule on all important aspects of customary law.

Nearby the airstrip, three giraffes are picking at the flat-topped acacia trees dotting the land. Mere metres away, a baby elephant trots after its mother. It's a surreal sight.

It is wildlife paradise like this that has made Kenya such a desirable destination for safaris. The animals are today shot with cameras instead of rifles used in big game hunting, which are now outlawed. And there's no need to rough it out either, as luxury lodges evoke the romance and charm of bygone colonial days.

Sasaab, named after the local Ipomea plant, is set in a wild landscape within the Westgate Community Conservancy of Ngutuk Ongiron Group Ranch in Kenya's Northern Frontier District. The Samburu Special Five reign here — the Reticulated Giraffe, Grey's zebra, Somali Ostrich, Beisa Oryx and the antelope Gerenuk.

It is also home to significant numbers of leopards, lions, elephants and buffaloes. The remote location means no jostling with other jeeps crammed with camera toting tourists, such as the crowds at the popular Maasai Mara.

Sasaab sits across half a mile of hillside where it commands unrivalled views of the Ewaso Nyiro River. The design is based on Moroccan principles, of which African heat is a central consideration. The ornate arches and open-sided pavilions help to circulate air while affording awesome views. Naturally, the lodge runs on solar power.

Each of the nine luxury 'tented suites' with thatched roofs and concrete flooring is strategically placed to provide privacy and panoramas of the river and wildlife. At over 100sqm in size, the generous space includes modern creature comforts with a semi-open shower, flush toilets and a private plunge pool on a deck overlooking the river.

Several baboons are hanging around the trees while a dik-dik calmly watches me from the grass skirting my tent. This delicate little African antelope is named after the sound it makes when alarmed, which never sounded throughout our visit, as after all, this is its home!

As night falls after a scorching day, we begin to understand the incredible raw beauty of this landscape. A choir of strange animal and insect sounds is occasionally punctuated by the whoop-

ing calls of hyenas. An armed staff accompanies us everywhere before dawn and after dark to protect against predators that prowl the land or puff adders. After dinner as we pause to marvel at the star-studded sky, a lion's roar in the distant darkness sends us scuttling back into our tent.

At 6am, a staff bearing a tray of hot coffee and tea awakens us. Pre-dawn hours are optimum times to catch the live theatre of wildlife in our backyard. Both Gabriel and Lesiata are already waiting to take us on our bespoke safari.

Mere metres from the lodge, Gabriel pulls to a stop around a clump of bright green 'toothbrush' trees or *Salvadora Indica*, and Lesiata points out three lions slumbering peacefully.

We make our way through the scrubby landscape scattered with acacia trees hung with weaver birds' nests and the forked-trunk Doun Palms unique to the region that hug the riverbanks. Herds of Lesser Kudu deer, graceful Impalas and Grey's zebras with their narrower stripe pattern roam freely. The spectacular cobalt-chested vulture guinea fowl steal attention from a long list of birds here. As we drive along the Ewaso Nyiro's winding, sandy tracks, we chance upon the spectacular sight of a herd of elephants crossing the river.

Gabriel takes us down to the riverbank where the gentle giants trundle around our vehicle curiously. They are so close we could feel their breath from their trunks.

"They know we are harmless," Gabriel explains. "Elephants are highly intelligent, sensitive animals. Just don't make any sudden movements. We are lucky to find them today. They are dominant animals here and wander all over the place."

For an entire magical hour, we observe them playing and rolling over in the mud, much like children, gouge water holes and rip out saplings.

Lesiata constantly scans the horizon for signs of wildlife. Our untrained eyes, which are more adept at spotting empty cabs on crowded streets, are useless out here in the bush, where flutters in the long grass or a sudden change in birdcalls can signify the presence of a predator. The shuffle of dust and dried grass tossing in the wind tell of the animal dramas that have taken place in the dark while we were sleeping.

"There's been some kind of fight here a while ago," he points out. We follow the tracks until they lead to a pile of bloodied ostrich feathers and trampled earth.

Our game drive ends with breakfast in the bush—freshly grilled sausages and sunny-side-up eggs prepared by Gabriel with a portable stove washed down by steaming hot coffee.

We visit a nearby Samburu settlement called Nkang' or manyatta. The rounded homes reflect the people's semi-nomadic lifestyle, built from small branches with foliage and covered with a thick coating of mud and cow dung. A thorn fence surrounding the settlement prevents the livestock from straying, as the cattle represent a man's wealth. The women regularly bleed the camels for blood as it is rich in protein, but the livestock is seldom slaughtered as they provide food needs and increases the size of the herd.

In the evening, we drive to a rocky plateau for our sundowner of ice-cold Tusker beer and wine. The 360-degree panorama provides an immense sense of space that is humbling with the realisation of the abundance of life that exists here.

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A getaway that gives back

Sasaab was created in 2007 by Tanya and Mikey Carr–Hartley whose family is renowned as bespoke safari specialists in East Africa since the first generation arrived in Kenya nearly a hundred years ago. The first guest to check in was Brad Lewis, the American producer of the movie *Ratatouille*, followed by fashion designers Donna Karan and Calvin Klein.

The lodge epitomises understated luxury with a philanthropic approach, as much of its profits are channelled back to the local community.

Over the years, Sasaab's guests have contributed over US\$125,000 (RM398,000) for community work and the Westgate Community Conservancy that have benefited 600 local families. Sasaab also supports the Ewaso Lions Organisation, the Grey Zebra Trust and the Northern Rangelands Trust. In June 2012, the lodge was awarded a gold Eco-Rating as only one among six lodges in Kenya.

Guests have additionally contributed desks, books, extra classrooms and a moped for the district nurse to access more remote settlements.

"The lodge employs only local tribesmen and has built health dispensaries, schools and water dams," says Doug Rundgren who manages the lodge with his wife Tanya.

"Some of the youths are sent for further education or professional guiding courses so they can find jobs as licensed tour guides, where their natural proficiency in animal tracking makes them prized assets. For instance, Onesmas would be sent to our lodge, Sala's Camp in Maasai Mara for exposure next season. Herdsmen were also sent for sustainable livestock management training in Namibia where they made a profit of KES8mil (RM300,000) last year."

Contributions from Sasaab have enabled girls from the villages to receive an education at the nearby Ngutuk Ongiron Primary School. It gives them the option to work instead of being married off at a very tender age that subject them to the custom of female circumcision before their wedding day.

Lesiata shares that he is the first in his family of 14 brothers and 11 sisters to complete a full secondary school education and to receive a stable income.

"The lodge has enrolled me in a distance learning course on wildlife management. I really want an education so that I can earn a living. Life has changed for all of us. I think it is important to honour our tradition and culture but we must not blindly follow what is irrelevant today such as female genital circumcision," he says.

"With education, we have at most two to three children, not up 15 kids before," he says. "We want to be educated to be self sufficient, we don't need to always rely on relief during droughts, and I don't want my children to herd goats and cattle as I did."

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- 1 Sasaab's design is based on Moroccan principles of which African heat is a central consideration with open pavilions.
- 2 Panoramic views of the Ewaso Nyiro river and surrounding wilderness can be enjoyed from each of the nine tented suites that include private plunge pools over an external decking.
- 3 The luxurious dwellings contain dreamy four-poster beds draped with muslin mosquito net, a semi open shower area and lounge.
- 4 Camel rides offer a different way of exploring the wild terrain surrounding Sasaab, which has been sensitively designed to blend in with the environment.
- 5 Elephants crossing the Ewaso Nyiro river is an enchanting sight.
- 6 A sighting of the Big Cats is what every visitor desires to spot on a safari. Up in Samburu, there is no need to jostle with other jeeps bearing hordes of camera toting tourists.
- 7 A congregation of colourfully attired Samburu women from the village of Umjoja presents traditional songs and dances to welcome visitors.